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## NEWS RELEASE

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# FAIR HOUSING BOARD LED SUCCESSFUL FIGHT IN MATTHEWS HOUSING DISCRIMINATION CASE

*State agency investigation and lawsuit resulted in  
injunctive relief and damages award*

**RICHMOND** – Following vigorous enforcement action by the Virginia Fair Housing Board, a Chesterfield County man must pay \$12,000 in damages for violating the Fair Housing Act.

Today in Chesterfield County Circuit Court, Rufus T. Matthews was ordered to pay \$4,500 to Nealie Pitts for engaging in housing discrimination when he said he would not sell her his house because of her race. Matthews also must pay \$7,500 to Housing Opportunities Made Equal (H.O.M.E.), a non-profit housing advocacy organization.

In announcing the decision, Judge John F. Daffron, Jr., praised the Fair Housing Board's "decisive steps" to reject discrimination and noted "the Commonwealth abhors such behavior and went to court to stop it."

The Fair Housing Board investigated Pitts' and H.O.M.E.'s complaints, found reasonable cause of racial discrimination, and issued a discrimination charge against Matthews. The Office of Attorney General represented the Board in bringing suit against Matthews earlier this year on behalf of Pitts and H.O.M.E.

Pitts and H.O.M.E. subsequently each obtained counsel and petitioned the court to join the Commonwealth's legal suit as plaintiffs. Last month, the court granted Pitts and H.O.M.E. default judgment against Matthews, making him liable for damages. As a result, no trial was necessary for the Fair Housing Board to demonstrate its claim of discrimination.

Once the court granted Pitts and H.O.M.E. status as plaintiffs, the Fair Housing Board and Office of Attorney General were prevented from seeking damages on their behalf. The Commonwealth's claims against Matthews were limited to injunctive relief and education.

With concurrence from Pitts and H.O.M.E., the Fair Housing Board entered into a settlement agreement with Matthews. The court approved the agreement on day one of the damages trial, Dec. 7, imposing an injunction prohibiting Matthews from violating the Fair Housing Act again in the future. The state's settlement agreement also mandate three hours of education provided by the Fair Housing Board to be completed within 60 days.

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The injunctive relief means that, if Matthews discriminates in future housing transactions, he not only violates the law but also violates a court order. Failure to comply with all terms of the settlement agreement could lead the court to sanction Matthews with even more significant damages awards or other legal sanctions.

“The outcome of this case is one more victory in the long struggle to make the American Dream more accessible for everyone,” said Mary Broz, spokesperson for the Fair Housing Board. “Victims of discrimination deserve a thorough investigation and fair hearing in their fight for justice.

During the administration of Gov. Mark R. Warner, the Fair Housing Board and Real Estate Board have issued reasonable cause findings in 16 cases alleging housing discrimination, compared with only two cases from 1998-2002. Discrimination charges are forwarded to the Office of Attorney General for settlement or civil action, with compensation for damages ranging from \$250 to \$15,000.

Gov. Warner and the General Assembly established the independent Fair Housing Board in 2003 – a recommendation of the Housing Study Commission – to enforce the Virginia Fair Housing Act, which prohibits discriminatory practices related to renting an apartment, buying a house, obtaining a mortgage, or purchasing homeowners’ insurance. Previously, all fair housing issues and cases fell under the jurisdiction of the Real Estate Board. The Real Estate Board continues to handle cases involving real estate licensees or their employees. The law prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, elderliness (defined as age 55 or over), familial status, and handicap.

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